

THE STUDY OF MAN

A DEBATE ON RACE

The Tocqueville-Gobineau Correspondence

MELVIN RICHTER

BOTH Arthur de Gobineau and Alexis de Tocqueville must be numbered among the most original thinkers of the 19th century. Although their ideas were quite incompatible, coincidence made them friends, and friendship produced a sustained correspondence. To readers a century later, the most provocative passages in their letters are those that argue Gobineau's racial theories. But these ideas, like Tocqueville's criticism of them, are incomprehensible except when viewed in the context of the great controversy that has not yet lost its power to divide and embitter Frenchmen: the controversy over the French Revolution.

In Paris governments can still fall, or fail to come into being, over issues and ideas that date back to the 18th century. Since 1789 French politicians and thinkers have always had to take a stand toward the Revolution and the beliefs of the Enlightenment philosophers who prepared its way. The extreme right has of course opposed the Revolution and all its works in furious invective. The center in French politics has never found any ideals it preferred to the secular rationalism of the 18th century, nor offered any political settlement to replace that of the Revolution. The French left, although less enthusiastic than the center,

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has criticized, not the essential principles of 1789, but only their insufficiently radical application.

Gobineau (1816-82) and Tocqueville (1805-59) belonged to the aristocratic class that had lost most by the Revolution. Yet they differed fundamentally in their interpretations of it. Tocqueville considered the aspirations of its first period to be noble and disinterested—the attempt to realize in political life those ideals of freedom and equality which Judaeo-Christian tradition had already applied to individuals in their relation to God. What Tocqueville condemned was the Jacobins' destruction of political liberty in the name of equality during the Robespierrean phase of the Revolution. All such distinctions Gobineau rejected. The Revolution for him had but one significance: it marked the victory of racially degenerate plebeians over racially superior aristocrats. In his concept of race lay the foundation and much of the superstructure of that doctrine of an "Aryan master race" which has had such atrocious consequences for our own times. Tocqueville found Gobineau's racial theory both unscientific and immoral. Throughout this correspondence, his letters have a prophetic quality, the point of which is clearer to us today than it was to his contemporaries.

The Tocqueville family was Norman. Tocqueville's father, when only twenty-two, was condemned to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal, and only the fall of Robespierre saved him from the guillotine. Under the Bourbon restoration he became a Prefect and a member of the Chamber of Peers. Through his influence his son Alexis became a magistrate. The Revolution of 1830 convinced the younger Tocqueville that Europe was in the throes of transition

to a democratic kind of society it had not previously known. To study the prototype of the democratic and egalitarian society that he believed inevitable for Europe, he traveled to the United States in 1831. Out of the nine months spent in this country came his classic *Democracy in America*, published in 1835.

In 1839 Tocqueville began his political career as an independent member of the Chamber of Deputies, where he remained for ten years, distinguishing himself intellectually but never exerting much influence. When Louis Napoleon came to power as the first President of the Second Republic, after the Revolution of 1848, he made Tocqueville his Foreign Minister. Tocqueville had hoped for a moderate republic. He resigned when he found that Napoleon was seeking, not ministers of integrity, but accomplices for the coup d'état that was to make him Emperor.

This marked the end of Tocqueville's active political career. The last ten years of his life he devoted to study and to writing two important works: *The Old Regime and the Revolution* and his *Recollections*. Both of these are dominated by his search for the origin and nature of the historical forces that had made possible Louis Napoleon's plebiscitary dictatorship.

Tocqueville died at the height of his powers, filled with bitterness at the prospect facing France. He thought it highly unlikely that she would ever enjoy the balanced and regulated liberty of a democracy, moderated by the influences of religion, custom, and law. After comparing the history of France to that of Britain and the United States, he concluded: "If a great revolution is able to establish liberty in a country, a number of succeeding revolutions make all regular liberty impossible for very many years." Subsequent French history has confirmed his insight that the Revolution by the violence of its later phases had divided France into irreconcilable groups.

Gobineau's life was crucially affected by his relations with Tocqueville. Their correspondence, which began in 1843 and ended in 1859, the year of Tocqueville's death, contains both intense controversy and avowals of friendship. When they first met, Tocqueville, the elder by eleven years, had already made his reputation, whereas Gobineau was still an unknown young man from the provinces seeking a career in the Paris of Louis Philippe. He discovered that his noble but impoverished

family could do little for him in the capital. Not until many years later did he inherit from his uncle the title and income that enabled him to cut a figure in accord with his aristocratic pretensions. Tocqueville, needing a research assistant, employed the younger man who was even then dogmatic and perversely brilliant. When Tocqueville became Foreign Minister in 1849, Gobineau became his private secretary; later he made his way into the diplomatic service where he spent most of his remaining life. While serving in Germany, Persia, Brazil, and Sweden, Gobineau wrote a great many books, among them his most significant work, the *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*, which appeared in the early 1850's.

Gobineau repudiated any and all political compromises that might have united the divided France of his time. It was the cynicism born of his despair which enabled him to serve the Second Empire. He regarded it as the type of despotism that alone could rule the degenerate mass of Frenchmen. With the advent of the Third Republic, which he excoriated, he went off to Rome where he lived out his last years.

During his lifetime Gobineau enjoyed his greatest and almost his only fame among the slaveholders of the United States (though, as he himself noted, they omitted translating what he wrote about the racial degeneration of white Americans). At the turn of the century, and again between the two world wars, his ideas attained some popularity in France and even more in Germany. Through his influence on Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Richard Wagner, he contributed to the development of Nazi racial theory. His political, as distinguished from his racial, views made themselves felt in the mystique of Vichy France. One of his descendants, the Comte Serpeille de Gobineau, not only worked to popularize his ideas, but also collaborated actively with the Germans under the occupation, thereby maintaining the family tradition of despising patriotism as plebeian and Jacobin.

G OBINEAU'S *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* amounts to a total repudiation of the moral ideals and political achievements of the 18th century. Chagrin at the downfall of his class may have been what really led him to regard Western society in the 19th century as sterile and decadent, but

he sought to justify this view by a new interpretation of history. Using the reductive method highly characteristic of the century he despised, he sought a single key to the understanding of human history. Denying that it was determined either by great men, the moral virtue of nations, or by ideas, economics, or physical environment, he found the all-determining factor in the inborn inequality of men, in the very different capacities with which they were endowed by the very different and unequal races to which they belonged.

Gobineau asserted that in the beginning all men had belonged to one of three discrete races—white, yellow, and black—each of which possessed a unique constitution determined by the blood flowing in the veins of its members. Only the "Aryan" branch of the white race was endowed with energy, creativity, political stability, and the will to power. The great period of European history came when the Germanic tribes, after overwhelming the Roman Empire, erected feudalism on its ruins. Feudalism, in Gobineau's view, established an aristocracy of "Aryan" conquerors in Western Europe as rulers over a population corrupted by intermarriage with the Romans. From the blood that flowed in "Aryan" veins sprang everything that was vigorous and creative in European culture. But the "Aryans" had become bastardized by intermarriage with the peoples they conquered; this had sealed the doom of Europe. The French Revolution was but the political manifestation of racial degeneration. The inferior classes descended from the Gallo-Romans had subverted the proper order of society by pulling down their natural rulers, the "Aryan" aristocrats now weakened by miscegenation. Nor was there any hope of reversing the course of history. With the destruction of "Aryan" racial purity all hope was lost of a society which united faith, political stability, and force. "Adieu, ages of faith; adieu, days of hope. . . . The time of Horace and Vergil is past, that of Juvenal begins."

Gobineau viewed the philosophers of the 18th century as tender-minded sentimentalists. Their passion for freedom and equality, their confidence in reason, and in man's capacity to improve his lot through control of his environment—all this was nonsense in the light of racial science. How could there be any talk about the right to liberty of all men when science had demonstrated that a few were born to rule and the rest to serve? And how

naive to prate about man's controlling his environment when everything was determined by heredity. It had been asserted in the 18th century that progress was the law of history. For Gobineau the chief problem of history was what made civilizations decline. His answer, which he claimed to have established scientifically, was miscegenation.

GOBINEAU was a defeated French aristocrat of the 19th century, not a German demagogue of the 20th. His sense of doom had its roots in his pessimism about the future of his class. Nationalism and patriotism he disdained as creations of the French Revolution. Nor was he anti-Semitic in the Nazi sense. He viewed the Jews as being as inferior as all the other Semites were to the "Aryans," but he displayed no particular hatred for them, nor did he assign them so great a role in history as did Hitler and Rosenberg. Among the "Aryans" themselves, he deemed the French and Germans to be racially vitiated beyond hope. The English he thought to be the most nearly pure in racial stock, although they too were defiled. The Nazi writers on race found Gobineau too pessimistic: what he had failed to envisage was "racial hygiene," that "final solution" which the Nazis discovered for the problems of Europe and the world. It was by this means that they proposed to restore the purity of that "Aryan" blood.

Tocqueville felt much less resentment than Gobineau at the loss of power suffered by his class. What worried him were the stern political choices confronting his generation. Not that he ever ceased to think of himself as an aristocrat. But for him aristocracy at its best meant a spirit of independence, the obligation to render disinterested service to one's fellow men, and the repudiation of that unheroic self-interest so dear to the bourgeoisie. He himself would have preferred to live in a stable society ordered on aristocratic principles, for he believed that men—all men—were most comfortable when living under a hierarchical system with clearly drawn class lines. But he could see no possibility whatever of reversing the process of social leveling set off by the French Revolution. Hence he sought to do what he could toward the application of his moral principles to the egalitarian society in which he found himself. He proposed to serve democracy as a candid friend who would warn men of those dangers to their liberty that were so

apt to arise in an age obsessed with equality.

For Tocqueville the great problem of post-revolutionary France was whether the passion for equality would lead to the sharing of rights or to the sharing of political slavery. Would men live under a democracy controlled and checked by an ordered system of liberties, or under a dictatorship that oppressed all equally? He clearly foresaw the possibility that the rule of king, aristocracy, and church might be replaced by a more thoroughgoing, demagogic despotism. He warned against the danger that an individual or party, after having used mass support to overthrow a regime, might establish a worse tyranny in the name of the people.

II

THE Tocqueville-Gobineau correspondence reveals a relationship that was perhaps most cordial when Gobineau was young and still unknown.* Their earlier letters abound in expression of mutual sympathy. Tocqueville had befriended the younger man and made possible his diplomatic career, and Gobineau tells his family that it is impossible to conceive of a kindness more complete and tender than that shown him by Tocqueville. The two men were united moreover by the manners of their class. "When nobility of spirit and delicacy of feeling are involved, we are and shall always be in the same camp," wrote Tocqueville to Gobineau. But when the latter started to develop his racial theories, Tocqueville began to show a growing antipathy. At first he tried to evade Gobineau's continued requests for his frank opinion on the *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*. But Gobineau, always proud and choleric, would neither tolerate reticence nor suffer criticism. Tocqueville then attempted to raise objections. Granted, he said, that people and nations gradually acquire certain distinctive characteristics. But these are in no way permanent and immutable, nor is there any need to explain them by racial factors. Gobineau is dogmatic and fatalistic because he so drastically oversimplifies. All the significant characteristics of a group are attributed to race. But how can such complex developments be attributed to one cause, and especially to a type of cause that can be neither proved nor disproved? To

verify Gobineau's hypothesis would require successful prediction of a race's future, as well as a type of corroboration from the past which could not be supplied by any records then existing or likely ever to be found. So much for Gobineau's appeal to the past. As for his claim that the future would vindicate his predictions, Tocqueville later in his *Souvenirs* pointed out how such a resort was always open to both parties in a dispute. "After much vociferation, we both ended by appealing to the future, that enlightened judge who always alas! arrives too late."

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

Saint-Cyr near Tours

November 17, 1853

"... Presumably in each of the different families that make up the human race, there exist certain tendencies, certain special aptitudes which have their origin in a thousand different causes. But that these tendencies, these aptitudes cannot be overcome—not only has this assertion never been proved, but from its very nature it can never be. Whoever attempts it must have available to him not only the past but the future. I feel certain that had Julius Caesar found the time, he would have gladly written a book to prove that the savages he encountered in Britain were not at all of the same race as the Romans. . . .

"It is one thing to discuss families of the human race which are distinguishable by exterior traits that remain profoundly and permanently different from one another. Here your theory, although no more convincing, in my opinion, at least is less improbable and easier to establish. But when your theory is applied to any one of these great human families—the white race, for example—the thread of argument disappears with every step and becomes impossible to follow. What could be more uncertain than the attempt to learn through history or tradition when, how, in what proportions were mixed the racial stocks of men who show no visible signs of difference in their origin? All these events occurred in remote and barbaric ages which have left only vague traditions or fragmentary written records. In taking your way of explaining the destinies of various peoples, do you believe that you have made history any clearer or that the science of man has gained in certainty by having abandoned that path followed by so many great thinkers who have sought the causes of events

**Correspondence entre Alexis de Tocqueville et Arthur de Gobineau, 1843-1859*, L. Schemann, ed., Paris, 2d ed., 1908. This correspondence has not been translated, and the parts of it I quote here are in my own free English rendition.

in the influence of men, emotions, ideas, and beliefs?"

IN THE next phase of the dispute, Tocqueville considers the fatalism of Gobineau's philosophy of history. Here he is concerned not with the validity of the theory as theory, but with its probable effects upon France and Europe, already so exhausted by war and revolution that, to many, liberty no longer seemed worth the struggle. Tocqueville contends that men can live in freedom only when they believe in themselves. To believe that civilization is decadent and that this is the result of an inexorable historical process which cannot be reversed surely must weaken the will to resist tyranny. Thus the theory of the *Essay* would perpetuate the worst effects of permanent inequality.

Gobineau had constructed a wholly idealized version of what life is like in a society where the many are subject to the few. In fact, permanent inequality completely demoralizes and debilitates, not only the ruled, but the rulers themselves. Tocqueville's experience in the United States had convinced him that the slaveholding class in the South was losing both its energy and its moral fiber. And to think that it was this form of society that Gobineau had chosen to praise!

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

Saint-Cyr near Tours

November 17, 1853

"Can there be any purpose in persuading those sluggish peoples who are already living in barbarism, indolence, or servitude, that, being what they are because of their race, nothing can be done to better their conditions, change their customs, or alter their government? Do you not see that from your doctrine follow all the evils produced by permanent inequality: pride, violence, scorn of fellow man, tyranny, and abjection in all its forms? . . . I shall stop here. Permit me to let our discussion end here. We are separated by too great a distance for it to be fruitful. . . ."

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

Saint-Cyr near Tours

December 20, 1853

". . . you have chosen to support precisely that point of view which I have always considered most dangerous to our age. Quite apart from the fact that I believe your theory of history to be false in the extreme application

that you give to it, this alone would make it impossible for you to convert me. The last century had an exaggerated and somewhat puerile confidence in man's power to control his destiny, both his own life and that of his society. This was the characteristic error of that period [the Enlightenment], but in the final analysis it was a noble error. While responsible for many follies, yet it produced many great achievements beside which posterity will find our age puny indeed. The fatigue and jaded emotions that follow from revolution, the miscarriage of so many generous ideas, and of so many great hopes, have now precipitated us into exactly the opposite condition. After believing that we could transform ourselves, we now believe that even the slightest reform is impossible. After excessive pride, we have fallen into an equally excessive humility. Once we thought ourselves capable of everything; today we believe ourselves capable of nothing. It pleases us to believe that from now on struggle and effort are futile, that our blood, our bodies, and our nervous systems will always prevail over our will and capacity. This is the peculiar disease of our time, and one quite at the opposite pole from that of our parents. And no matter how you rearrange your argument, it will support rather than control this tendency: it will drive your contemporaries, who are already too weak, to an even greater weakness. All this does not prevent me from seeing what is truly remarkable in your work. . . . But in the course of studying the German language, I have not become so German that either the novelty or the philosophic merit of an idea can make me oblivious to its moral and political consequences. . . ."

Gobineau responded with a strong defense of his position. But he made no attempt to defend the validity of his evidence or his mode of making inductions from it. To Tocqueville's charge that Gobineau's theory, if generally accepted, would paralyze the wills of men, he replied that he was less concerned with the effects produced by his theory than with its scientific truth. Like the physician diagnosing his patient's ailment with clinical detachment, he was dealing with Europe's mortal illness, one that could not be concealed by industrialism and imperialism.

*Tocqueville was at this time studying German so that he could contrast conditions in Germany at the outbreak of the French Revolution with those in France at the time.

GOBINEAU TO TOCQUEVILLE

*Teheran**March 20, 1856*

"I am tormented by your ceaseless reproaches that I am lulling to sleep those who are already drowsy. Yet if I do put them to sleep it is certainly not with caresses. . . . If indeed I do them damage, it is with acids and not with perfumes. What I am saying to my readers is not, 'You are guilty, or not guilty.' Rather I tell them, 'You are dying.' Nothing could be further from my mind than to contend that they cannot be conquerors for a time. . . . Far be it from me to encourage or discourage them; this is not my concern.

"But I am telling them, 'You have passed the age of youth, you approach that age which verges on decrepitude. No doubt your autumn is more vigorous than that of the peoples decaying everywhere else in the world. Nevertheless it is autumn. Winter is coming on, and you have produced no heir to succeed you. You may found kingdoms, great empires, republics—do what you will. All this is possible; I do not oppose it. Go, torture the Chinese, finish off the Turks, annex Persia—all this is possible and even inevitable. But while I do not interdict them, nevertheless the causes of your weakness continue to accumulate and are even aggravated by your activity. . . . The thirst for material pleasures which torments you is an indubitable symptom, as certain as the red cheeks of those infected by diseases of the lungs. All previous civilizations in the process of decay have shown these same symptoms and have congratulated themselves on their seeming vigor, as you do now. . . . Can I do anything about this? Because I state what is happening and will happen, do I affect in any way the days left to you?' . . .

"I am no more criminal than is a physician who says that the end is approaching. Either I am right or I am wrong. If I am wrong, then nothing remains of my four volumes. If I am right, then my facts cannot be altered by wishful thinking."

Tocqueville refused to accept Gobineau's image of himself as a disinterested clinician. He deemed Gobineau's method to be what today would be called an "ideology." Gobineau was defending values and prejudices he had acquired extra-scientifically, and he was doing so with any and every scrap of evidence he could find within a framework of assumptions he had never examined.

THE publication of Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* had produced no impression whatever upon French society, Gobineau complained to Tocqueville. Tocqueville answered with the remarkable prediction that Gobineau's ideas would find their natural audience in Germany.

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

*Tocqueville, Manche**July 30, 1856*

". . . Today there is no chance whatever that in France any intellectual work will receive either a lively or a lasting reception. Our temperament which has been so literary, particularly during the last two centuries, has undergone a complete transformation. What prevail now are lassitude, disenchantment, and a distaste for ideas. Instead, there is a love for detail that goes along with those political institutions which dull the intelligence like a powerful sedative. The class that really rules does not read. . . .

". . . thus I believe that your best chance of success is for your book to create a stir abroad, especially in Germany. Then it will be read in France. For in Europe it is only the Germans who become so enamored with what they consider to be abstract truth that they fail to calculate its practical consequences. The Germans can furnish you with a really friendly audience whose judgment, sooner or later, will produce profound reverberations in France. . . ."

But the consolation Tocqueville offered served only to send their controversy into another phase. While condemning the effects of the Second Empire upon French intellectual life, Tocqueville had mentioned the support given by the Roman Catholic Church to Napoleon III in return for his concessions to Catholic schools and for his active discouragement of anti-clericalism. The atmosphere created thereby further diminished the chances that Gobineau's work might receive a friendly reception in France—or so Tocqueville assumed. For to him it seemed obvious that Gobineau's theories, despite their occasional concessions to the Church, could not be squared with its teachings.

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

*Tocqueville, Manche**July 30, 1856*

"Surely you are not unaware of how devout we have become here in France. Every day my

village curé in his sermons cites as an example to us the Christian virtues of the Emperor, his faith, his charity, and all the rest. . . . While in fact we now concern ourselves exclusively with material pleasures, we are said to be advancing daily along the path of saintliness. I assure you that Merimée himself, who boasts in private of never having been baptized, would not dare to praise publicly such doctrines as yours. For it must be said that although you bow occasionally in the direction of the Church, the very premises of your system are hostile to it. No doubt your great effort to remain within the bounds of Catholicism is made in good faith. But almost every conclusion that can be deduced from your ideas is to some extent incompatible with the Church's doctrine."

Gobineau responded angrily. How easily his critics allowed themselves the liberty of personal attacks upon him! The reviewers of his *Essay* had accused him of being everything from a disguised Jesuit to an extreme materialist. Now his old friend charged him with advancing opinions incompatible with his beloved religion.

GOBINEAU TO TOCQUEVILLE

Teheran

November 29, 1856

"... no, if I say that I am a Catholic, that is what I am. To the ultimate degree of perfection? Certainly not. But I regret my deficiencies while aspiring to a more nearly perfect condition. And when I say 'Catholic' I mean utterly and completely, both in my heart and in my mind. I should abandon immediately my view of history if I shared your belief that it could not be reconciled with Catholic doctrine.

"It is true that once I was a Hegelian and an atheist. . . . But once M. de Rémusat . . . said to me, 'you are certainly a characteristic product of your century. Although you believe in the principles of feudalism, nevertheless you oppose Christianity.' Struck by this observation so just in its irony, I often reflected upon it. Not that I consider myself to be a systematic thinker of importance. To me, system has never seemed an essential part of human perfection. But I do not like the feeling of adhering to principles which are shockingly inconsistent with one another. Thus I had to make a choice. Either I must abandon my view of feudalism, or cease believing in Feuerbach and others

like him because their political views horrified me. For I believe that the liberties which existed under feudalism have been calumniated and misunderstood by later generations which had become unworthy to enjoy these liberties. This is my first point.

"Secondly: when I saw revolution no longer as an abstract idea, but with my own eyes, the sight of all those men in dirty blouses so disgusted me, so sharpened my sense of what was true and just that, had I not been already married, I would have been capable of becoming a monk simply to assert my opposition. And that was only the beginning. A life of action gradually pushed me further along the road of belief; my stay in Asia completed the process. Here one resorts to prayer throughout the day, for life is not without its dangers. . . . And thus it is that I am most sincerely, and completely, and profoundly Catholic."

HERE is how Tocqueville answered Gobineau's protestations about being a good Catholic.

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

Tocqueville, Manche

January 14, 1857

"... No, my dear friend, calm yourself. I know you too well to take you for a hypocrite. . . . I believe you to be one of those—as numerous today as in the ages of faith—who, despite feelings of veneration and a sort of filial tenderness towards Christianity, yet remain, unfortunately, not absolutely convinced believers. A soul in this condition does not believe itself to be hypocritical when it pays every respect to a religion so benevolent and holy. . . . It is among such villains that I have placed you. Forgive me. But I cannot believe that you do not realize the difficulties involved in reconciling your theories with either the letter or the spirit of Christianity. As for the letter—what is taught in Genesis if not the unity of mankind, its common descent from the same man? As for the spirit of Christianity—surely its distinctive quality is the desire to abolish all the racial distinctions still preserved in Judaism. Thus Christianity treats all men as belonging to a single family whose members are equally capable of improving themselves. How can this spirit, as commonly understood by Christians, be reconciled with a philosophy of history which describes races as distinct and unequal in understanding, judgment, and behavior?

And this inequality is attributed to unalterable and inborn predispositions which make it impossible for certain races ever to hope to improve themselves. Christianity considers all men as brothers and equals. Your theory regards them as cousins whose common ancestor is to be found only in heaven. Here on earth, there are but conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves by right of birth.

"All this is so true that your doctrine is approved, cited, annotated—by whom? By the owners of Negroes, by all those who favor eternal servitude and justify it by the theory of racial inequality. I know that in the Southern part of the United States there are clergymen (nevertheless, slave owners) who preach from their pulpits doctrines similar to your own.

But you can be certain that the majority of Christians who are uninfluenced by this kind of self-interest will show not the slightest sympathy for your teachings. . . . I must say that reading your book has left me with doubts about the solidity of your faith. . . . You tell me that in this I am mistaken, that you have become an absolutely convinced Christian. May Heaven hear you! . . ."

Years after Tocqueville's death, his doubts were confirmed. Gobineau abandoned Catholicism and in all seriousness began to worship the old pagan gods of the Vikings. And in his last book, he actually attempted to trace his ancestry back to Ottar Jarl, a Norwegian pirate settled in Normandy who had been a member of a royal race that claimed to be descended from Odin.

THEIR sharp disagreement about the religious implications of Gobineau's doctrine led on to further differences that ended all serious discussion between the two men. The same letter that had brought Gobineau's declaration of faith acknowledged receipt of his friend's latest book, the *Ancien Régime*.

There Tocqueville had written, in defiance of the censorship, that his love of liberty would no doubt seem old-fashioned in the France of that day, whose rulers denied that free political institutions were practicable. Yet, Tocqueville had written, even the most ruthless dictator cherishes freedom, if only for himself. And so it is only his contempt for his fellows as unworthy of liberty that leads him to deny it to all but himself. "Thus a man's respect for absolute government is in direct proportion

to his contempt for his fellow countrymen."

This remark Gobineau took to be directed at himself. He replied with a savage outburst. Yes, he despised France. It was corrupt to the core; its inhabitants neither wished nor deserved political freedom. This degenerate rabble could be controlled only by a dictatorship. True political freedom had existed only under the decentralized feudal institutions founded and maintained by pure "Aryans." As "Aryan" blood became tainted by intermarriage, feudalism had begun to give way to a centralized state. This trend, starting in the 14th century with Philip the Fair, was pushed by all subsequent rulers of France—French kings, revolutionary governments, and Napoleon. Thus for the past five hundred years France had had the same regime under different names. Since despotism was inevitable, the only question remaining was who was to be the despot.

Rational discussion, in politics as in ethics, can be fruitful only on the basis of a common set of values. Gobineau had made it more than evident that no such consensus existed between him and Tocqueville. Gobineau could not think well of himself without despising his countrymen. His opinion that a despotic dictatorship was the best possible government for France served to justify his activity as a diplomat of the Second Empire. But even so—what could loyalty mean in so debased a period? As a young man Gobineau had already made his decision. "A pure *condottiere*, who desires to be nothing more, I shall make my choice when the time comes and follow whoever offers me the greatest advantages. For my part, I shall serve faithfully for the length of my enlistment." In his belief that all was justified once God was dead, that faithful service was the only obligation of an honorable man in a dishonorable state, Gobineau anticipated the German generals who served Hitler so faithfully.

In a letter remarkable both for its biting irony and its moral elevation, Tocqueville replied to Gobineau's letter of November 29, 1856, by forbidding him ever again to discuss his political opinions in their correspondence. Tocqueville's words showed how a man of alert intelligence and real moral sensibility was able to grasp the implications of the theory of racial inequality long years before the world had a chance to view the consequences of acting upon it.

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

*Tocqueville, Manche**January 24, 1857*

"I must ask you, my dear friend, to abstain from any further discussion of your political opinions. Unable to enjoy the liberty that existed five hundred years ago, you prefer to have none at all. Fearing the despotism of political parties, under which one can at least defend one's dignity and independence with the spoken and written word, you prefer to be oppressed by a single individual against whom no one, not even you, can whisper a word. Again, so be it. There is no arguing about tastes. . . . Seriously what can come from political discussions between us? We belong to worlds that are diametrically opposed. Thus neither of us can hope to convince the other. Serious matters and new ideas must not be discussed by friends who cannot be expected to agree. Each of us is perfectly logical within his own mode of thought. You find our contemporaries to be overgrown children who are as degenerate as they are poorly brought up. Therefore you approve of their being manipulated by shows, by rumor, by tinsel, by the beautiful brocade of superb uniforms which so often turn out to be nothing but servants' livery. Like you, I believe that our contemporaries are poorly brought up and that this is the principal cause of their suffering and weakness. But I believe that the damage done by a bad upbringing can be repaired by providing them with a better one. And I believe that this is a task which we must not dare to abandon. I believe that, as with all men, part of them can still be influenced by a well-directed appeal to their natural honesty and good sense. In short, I wish to treat them as men. Perhaps I am wrong. But in any case, I am the product of my principles and increasingly I feel a profound pleasure in following them.

"You have a profound contempt for the human species, at least our branch of it; you consider it as fallen and incapable of ever rising again. Its very nature condemns it to servitude. Thus, to maintain the necessary minimum of order among this rabble, government by saber and club appears highly desirable to you. Nevertheless, I can scarcely think that you would expose your own back to the whip as a personal testimonial to your principles. As for myself, I feel that I have neither the right nor the inclination to consider my race and my country in this light. I see no

necessity to despair of them. In my eyes, human societies are like individual human beings in that their acts have significance only when they are free. That a regime of liberty is more difficult to found and maintain in democratic societies like our own than in certain aristocratic societies that have existed in the past—this I myself always have maintained. But that liberty is now impossible—this is a proposition that I shall never be bold enough to consider. Even if despair were the necessary preliminary to achieving liberty, I should beg God not to make me believe this.

"No, I shall never believe that the human species, which stands at the head of created things, has become that debased herd which you make it out to be; that nothing is left for us except to give ourselves over, without any hope of a better future and without any reservations, to a small number of shepherds, who, after all, are no better animals than ourselves, and often are worse. Permit me to have less confidence in you than in the goodness and justice of God. . . ."

Gobineau wrote in reply: ". . . you have answered my reasoned arguments with six pages of irony. I must conclude that you are not interested in considering these matters further. Let us leave them, then, and speak of other things." From then on he wrote to Tocqueville of the picturesque scenes he saw about him in Persia, and Tocqueville answered in kind until his death two years later.

SEEN in the perspective of our century, it was not Tocqueville but Gobineau who had the greater subsequent effect. The genealogy of National Socialist racial theory is clear. Gobineau took up race thinking in the crude state it had been left in by Boulainvilliers and other forgotten 18th-century French publicists, and converted it into a modern ideology. He incorporated in it all the ingredients necessary to its future success: a "scientific" vocabulary, biological concepts, philosophical determinism, and that profound skepticism toward traditional beliefs, combined with the willful assertion of new prejudices, which Nietzsche was to call "the transvaluation of values." As Tocqueville had predicted, this heady mixture found acceptance in Germany, but not until an Englishman, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, had tailored Gobineau to the tastes of Wilhelminian Germany by adding anti-Semitism, identifying the late 19th-cen-

tury German with Gobineau's "Aryan," and exchanging fatalism for an expansive Pan-Germanism. The further changes in detail introduced by Rosenberg and Hitler were slight: as Léon Poliakov has noted, the only innovations National Socialism made in racial theory lay in its ruthless determination to stop at nothing in making reality conform to it, and in the fearful techniques it devised.

IN FAIRNESS to Gobineau, certain distinctions must be made. He himself mourned a lost and irretrievable society, and located his utopia in the remote past. Far from offering any scheme for remaking the world by conquest and mass murder, he coldly insisted that mankind as a whole was suffering from a disease for which there were no remedies. Toward the mass of men, whatever their origin, he felt a degree of disgust matched only by Nietzsche's, and he shared the latter's contempt for the 19th-century Germans.

Let us then abandon that form of intellectual history which consists in passing *ex post facto* moral judgments. In this as in other matters, there is a grave danger that those who combat totalitarianism will emulate its practice of re-writing history for the sake of propaganda. Surely, we need all the intelligence and discrimination we can muster to understand why race thinking has had such an effect on the modern world. No part of the history of that kind of thinking is more ambiguous than Gobineau's role in its development. Here was an extremely idiosyncratic aristocrat who celebrated the anarchical freedom enjoyed by the feudal nobility and saw the great tragedy of European history in the revolutionary events which culminated in the nation-state. All movements that aroused the masses, led to revolution, and played upon nationalism were anathema to him. Had he been confronted by Nazi racial theory, he would have been able to reject both its propositions and its practical implications as quite different from his own. But had he persisted in defending the intellectual method of his *Essay*, he could not have consistently denied the Nazis their opportunity to derive the conclusions they themselves did. Implicit in Gobineau's thought were a style of historical myth-making, a theory of value, and a mode of reasoning that by its systematic abuse of logic showed the way for all subsequent racial theorists. For reasons he could no more foresee

than Tocqueville, it turned out that just those features of Gobineau's system which rendered it impossible to take him seriously as a thinker were the ones that best served the purposes of totalitarian ideology.

Although Gobineau detested intellectuals, he was himself one, but of a peculiar sort, a frustrated aristocrat seeking intellectual revenge upon those who had destroyed his class. His perspective was that of a *déclassé*, and his insight into the processes of bourgeois and industrial society was from the angle of a class beaten down by that society. The latter's values: political liberty, hard work, careers open to talent, professional or technical expertise—all these he disdained. His own claim to power and position he based upon birth alone. But in 19th-century France birth was no longer decisive, and Gobineau could gain a hearing for his ideas only by using the language of science, or—what was even more popular in his century—that of pseudo-science. Wrenching out of context the traditional claim of the aristocracy that a man's place should be determined not by what he did but by what he was, Gobineau asserted that what a man was must be determined by his *race*—not by his *family*. It was this message, conceived out of the resentment of a declassed aristocrat, that so well served all those in Germany who were made to feel unwanted and insignificant by the aftermath of a lost war, inflation, and economic depression.

But the sentence of death Gobineau passed on the modern world has remained more cogent today than the National Socialist dream of reshaping it into a utopia for "Aryans." Time has filled the Tocqueville-Gobineau correspondence with retrospective ironies. Gobineau, despite his claim that history was ineluctably determined, did in fact affect its course, but in ways that confirmed Tocqueville's indictment of his intellectual method. Indeed, the brief remarks Tocqueville made on this point can hardly be bettered, and they apply to totalitarianism on the left just as much as to that on the right. "For my part, I detest these absolute systems which represent all the events of history as depending upon great first causes linked by the chain of fatality, and which, as it were, suppress men from the history of the human race. They seem narrow to my mind, under their pretense of broadness, and false beneath their air of mathematical exactness."